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Federal Agencies Release Final Environmental Assessment on Double-crested Cormorant Damage Control Actions in Michigan

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services program and the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have released the final Environmental Assessment (EA) spelling out plans to reduce double-crested cormorant damage in Michigan.

Conflicts with human and natural resources—including commercial aquaculture, recreational fisheries, vegetation, and other birds that nest with cormorants—led to a decision by the Fish and Wildlife Service to develop a management strategy for double-crested cormorants. In October 2003, following four years of development and nearly 10,000 letters of comment, the agency finalized an Environmental Impact Statement that addressed cormorant management nationwide.

The Service issued regulations that established a public resource depredation order allowing state wildlife agencies, tribes, and Wildlife Services in 24 states, including Michigan, to conduct cormorant control for the protection of public resources.

The EA is a step-down document to the Environmental Impact Statement and examines the need for action and relevant issues, alternatives, and environmental consequences of cormorant damage control in Michigan. Wildlife Services and the Fish and Wildlife Service selected Alternative 1 in the EA, which will use an Integrated Wildlife Damage Management approach to reduce cormorant damage and conflicts to aquaculture, property, natural resources, and human health and safety. When appropriate, physical exclusion, habitat modification or harassment will be used to reduce damage. In other situations, birds may be humanely removed under the depredation order by shooting, egg oiling/destruction, nest destruction or euthanasia following live capture.

“This alternative was chosen because it provides Wildlife Services the best opportunity to reduce cormorant damage with fewer impacts to non-target species, which was a concern expressed by many who commented on the draft EA,” said Peter Butchko, director of the Michigan Wildlife Services Office. “In addition, it provides safeguards for public health and safety, and reduces economic impacts on aquaculture resources and private property.”

Five alternatives, including the “No Action” alternative required under the National Environmental Policy Act, were examined in the EA. The other alternatives involved more restricted roles for Wildlife Services in managing cormorant damage. Written comments on the EA were solicited and carefully considered. Wildlife Services was the lead agency, and the Fish and Wildlife Service a cooperating agency, on the assessment.

Based on the analysis in the EA, the two agencies determined that Alternative 1 would not significantly impact the quality of the human environment, resulting in a Finding of No Significant Impact by each agency.

Wildlife Services and other agencies acting under the Fish and Wildlife Service's 2003 depredation order must have landowner permission, may not significantly affect other migratory bird species or threatened and endangered species in the course of their cormorant damage control activities, and must satisfy annual reporting and evaluation requirements. The Fish and Wildlife Service will ensure the long-term conservation of cormorant populations and other birds nesting with them through oversight of the activities of agencies acting under the order.

When management actions take place, Wildlife Services will adhere to mitigation measures that were developed for the EA to avoid or minimize potential adverse effects on other birds and threatened and endangered species that may nest with or near cormorants. Mitigation measures include working during times of the day that will cause minimal impacts to other species; using noise-suppressed firearms that cause the least disruption; keeping safe distances away from sensitive species such as piping plovers and bald eagles; and consulting with the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to determine the locations of species of concern.

"We have given careful consideration to impacts on non-target species and we believe that these measures will adequately protect them during cormorant damage control activities," said Steve Wilds, chief of the Division of Migratory Birds for the Fish and Wildlife Service's Great Lakes-Big Rivers Region.

Wildlife Services' National Wildlife Research Center and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources will be studying the impacts of cormorant control activities on cormorants, non-target bird species and fish species (particularly yellow perch) that cormorants are thought to affect. This will allow refinement of management approaches in the future.

Double-crested cormorants are large, fish-eating birds that nest in colonies and roost in large numbers. A reduction in eggshell-thinning pesticides (primarily DDT), increased protection under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and abundant food resources on their breeding and wintering grounds have caused cormorant numbers and distribution to increase greatly in the last 30 years.

The current double-crested cormorant population in North America is estimated at two million birds. The species is widespread throughout the Great Lakes and about 115,000 pairs currently nest there. There are 48 known double-crested cormorant breeding sites in Michigan, and biologists believe about 30,000 breeding pairs nest in the state.

The EA can be obtained from Wildlife Services' Michigan state office at 517-336-1928 or viewed and downloaded at the following web site: <http://midwest.fws.gov/nepa>.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 63 Fish and Wildlife

Management offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

USDA's Wildlife Services provides federal leadership in managing problems caused by wildlife. Wildlife Services recognizes that wildlife is an important public resource greatly valued by the American people. By its very nature, however, wildlife is a highly dynamic and mobile resource that can damage agricultural and industrial resources, pose risks to human health and safety, and affect other natural resources. The Wildlife Services program carries out the federal responsibility for helping to solve problems that occur when human activity and wildlife are in conflict with one another.

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